An Addiction in the Family: What It Means For the Workplace

Companies and organizations have become more aware of the impact employees with alcohol, drug or gambling problems have on the workplace. But what if the addiction is in the employee's family? Is the workplace still affected? Should the workplace play a role in assisting and treating the employee's family members?

When there is an alcohol, drug or gambling problem in the family, there can be consequences in the workplace. For example:

Mike's wife has a serious alcohol problem. He doesn't talk about it, but his co-workers can always tell when Mike's wife has been drinking again. Mike is cranky and agitated and just not himself. His mind is not on his work and he makes mistakes doing work he has done for years. Because he works in a safety-sensitive position, his co-workers no longer feel safe working with him.

Cathy's teenage daughter has been experimenting with drugs. Sometimes she doesn't come home and Cathy doesn't know what to do next. This morning Cathy called in to see if she could take the remaining two weeks of her vacation starting immediately.

Read on to learn more about

- effects of a family member's alcohol, drug or gambling problem on the workplace
- effects of alcohol, drug and gambling problems on families
- effective ways for workplaces and families to work together to deal with addiction

EFFECTS ON THE WORKPLACE

When an employee has a problem with alcohol, drugs or gambling, it often shows up at work. Quality or quantity of work may decrease, mood swings may increase and the employee may have higher rates of absence from the job. Co-workers might complain about the employee "not pulling their weight."

When the alcohol, drug or gambling problem is in the employee's family, the effects may be a little harder to see.

The employee might talk openly about the problem. However, it is more likely that they will keep it to themselves and attempt to "solve" it on their own.

The strain of dealing with someone else's alcohol or drug use or gambling can change an employee's behaviour and performance on the job. Because their attention may be focused on the addiction problem, they may

- appear preoccupied at work
- seem depressed or tired
- call home often or receive a lot of personal phone calls at work
- miss work or ask for time off or vacation with very little notice
- miss deadlines
- show decreases in quality and quantity of work
- have strained relationships with co-workers because of mood swings
- cause co-workers to complain that the employee is not "pulling their weight"
- create a safety risk because of their preoccupation with the problem

If this list looks familiar it is because these are the same signs that might indicate an addiction problem in the employee! In fact, many different personal problems can cause these changes in behaviour, affecting the employee, their family and the workplace.

EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL/DRUG AND GAMBLING PROBLEMS ON THE FAMILY

When one family member has a problem with alcohol, drugs or gambling, the whole family is usually affected. As the alcohol or drug abuse or problem gambling continues, the family often tries harder and harder to adjust and cope with the problem.

Family members, including children, may make excuses for the person with the problem, even apologizing for their actions. They often take over the addicted person's responsibilities in an effort to keep the family going. The spouse may need to take on the sole responsibility of parenting or become the main breadwinner. Children may begin "caretaking" the addict or they may become responsible for the care of their younger siblings.

The family members may be very reluctant to admit or talk about the addiction. Not talking about the problem allows the family to pretend it isn't there, or to deny its impact on the family. By hiding the problem, the family may hope to avoid embarrassment, job loss, and other possible consequences of public exposure.

Families affected by alcohol, drug or gambling problems may also have a difficult time trusting. They may have dealt with repeated broken promises from the person with the problem or seen failed attempts at quitting.

Trouble talking about the problem and trusting others may prevent employees and family members from reaching out to workplace programs for assistance. The workplace may find it hard to get support from family members in dealing with the problem.

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Every person who has an alcohol, drug or gambling problem will affect the lives of many others, including family members, co-workers and friends. The good news is that, with help, employees and their families can deal successfully with addiction.

Working together, individuals, families and the workplace can encourage someone with an alcohol, drug or gambling problem to get help and support them in the process.

EFFECTIVE WAYS TO WORK TOGETHER

The key strategies for dealing with addiction issues in the workplace are

- education
- assistance if there is a problem

Education

Education is one of the most important things an employer can offer to help prevent addiction-related problems at their workplace. Employees need to know about addiction, know how to recognize a problem, and know what to do if a problem with alcohol, other drugs or gambling is developing. Early intervention increases the chances that an alcohol, drug or gambling problem can be dealt with effectively.

Here are some guidelines for educating workers and their families about alcohol, drug and gambling problems.

- Provide information sessions on addiction to all employees. Invite family members to attend.
- Ensure that employees and their family members know the sources of help available to them. This should include resources within and outside the organization.
- Display posters, listing the telephone numbers of sources of help available, in prominent workplace locations.
- Make written information (e.g., pamphlets) available to employees. These should be easy to find and displayed where employees can pick them up without anyone else noticing. The coffee room, employee washrooms or locker rooms are great places for pamphlet racks.
- Make sure family members can also get written information. Information can be sent to homes in newsletters or mail-outs.
- Inform all employees about the steps to take if they are concerned about their own, or someone else's, substance use or gambling.
- Teach all employees about enabling behaviours—the actions they take that actually help the problem to continue. These actions include covering up, making excuses and ignoring the problem. Enabling can happen on the job as well as between family members.

Supervisors and managers need additional training. It is important for them to know

- how to recognize and assist employees who are experiencing personal and family problems
- how to manage performance to ensure that personal and family problems are not interfering with employee health, performance, safety and morale
- how to conduct performance meetings so that troubled employees are encouraged to get help
- what workplace policies are in place to support troubled employees and their families

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- what workplace programs and community services are available to assist employees and their family members
- how to refer employees and their families to the sources of help available

Assistance if there is a problem

There are many ways to help employees and their family members to deal with personal problems.

An employee may be concerned about a family member's use of alcohol or drugs or their gambling. Their spouse or child may be the cause of concern, or maybe it is an aging parent or a sibling. Sometimes it is the family members who are concerned about the employee's substance use or gambling.

The following strategies are ways that a workplace can offer support and assistance to employees and their families dealing with an addiction. These strategies can also be used to support an employee or family member who has other personal troubles, such as relationship problems, mental health problems and stress.

There are many ways employees and their family members can be helped to deal with personal problems.

Employee and Family Assistance Programs • Many workplaces offer an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to assist troubled employees. The employee is encouraged to contact the EAP on their own if they are experiencing a personal problem and want confidential, professional help to deal with it.

Many employers are expanding their EAPs to include services to family members. These programs are called Employee and Family Assistance Programs (EFAP). EFAPs offer services directly to family members experiencing personal problems. If the employee has a problem, such as an addiction, the EFAP can support family members trying to deal with that problem.

Community Resources • Many workplaces do not have a formal EAP or EFAP. Instead, they may have a manager or human resources staff member who serves as the link between employees with problems and sources of help in the community.

The employee may be given a list of counselling services that are available to assist them, or their family members, in dealing with personal issues. Family members might be linked to community services directly or through print information that is sent home. Some employers and unions will pay all or part of fees charged by the community resources.

Community Support Groups • There are a variety of support groups that meet to deal with problems such as addiction, depression, grief and loss, etc. Some of these are run by community agencies or professionals while others follow a 12-step approach.

12-step support groups are worldwide fellowships of men and women who meet to assist each other in dealing with a common problem. Some examples of 12-step groups are Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous.

There are also 12-step support groups for family members. Al-Anon and Nar-Anon groups are for adults affected by someone else's alcohol and drug use. Gam-Anon groups are for adults affected by someone else's gambling. Alateen is a group for teens affected by someone's alcohol use.

These groups are listed in the telephone directory. Some workplaces host support group meetings on-site to make it easy for employees to attend.

Peer Support Programs • More and more workplaces are recognizing the benefits of peers helping peers, or one worker helping another. The basic principle of peer support is that co-workers provide a bridge between an employee with a problem and the sources of help available to assist them in dealing with the problem.

Peer support team members are not counsellors. They are trained listeners who can offer support, encouragement and referral to the available sources of help. Members may have experienced personal problems themselves or they may have a family member who has had a personal problem.

Some organizations even make workplace peer support programs available to family members. Perhaps an employee will contact a peer support team member and ask them to talk to a 16-year-old teen that is experimenting with drugs. Perhaps the employee will ask the peer support team member to meet with their spouse to offer a listening ear about the challenges of dealing with an elderly parent who is abusing prescription drugs. Another new approach to peer support is to invite members of employees' families to join the peer support team.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Employees and their family members must feel certain that their privacy will be protected if they seek help for alcohol, drug or gambling problems. Confidentiality is the cornerstone of any assistance program.

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WORKING TOGETHER— EVERYBODY BENEFITS

When a workplace becomes involved in assisting employees and their family members, everybody wins. Employees are more productive at work, workplace safety is improved, families get help dealing with the problem, and co-workers have a healthy employee back on the team.

For more information

AADAC (Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission) offers a range of services to assist businesses in managing workplace substance use and gambling concerns. These services include

Information/Resources • Besides the *It's Our Business Information Series*, AADAC offers several resources for workplace leaders and employees.

The *It's Our Business* manual gives leaders in the workplace the information they need to build a healthy, well-functioning workplace team. This practical, well-organized binder offers clear information and insightful advice in an easy-to-follow format, based on a philosophy of fitness for work. Employers and managers are advised to remain focused on what is their business: the employee's ability to do his or her job.

To supplement the manual, AADAC offers three brochures to inform employees and enlist them as allies in creating a workplace that is free from the problems created by the abuse of alcohol, other drugs and gambling:

- *Is Drinking, Using Drugs or Gambling Affecting My Work?* helps employees to assess whether their work is being affected by their substance use or gambling and offers suggestions on finding further help.
- *Someone at Work Has a Problem* guides employees in intervening with a co-worker who may have an alcohol, other drug or gambling problem by outlining workplace indicators and tips for a successful intervention.
- *What You Need to Know About Fitness for Work* outlines the concept of fitness for work, and describes how substance use and gambling affect fitness for work, what an employee can do to be fit for work, and what one can do when others are not fit for work.

For more information on these and other resources from AADAC, call 310-0000/780-427-7319 (in Alberta) or 1-800-280-9616 or check the website at www.aadac.com

Employer Consultations • If you are concerned about an employee's substance use or gambling and would like to discuss strategies to intervene, contact the AADAC office nearest you.

Client Services • AADAC's network of services offers information sessions, assessment, individual and group counselling, and intensive treatment to any Albertan concerned about a substance use or gambling problem. Contact the nearest AADAC office for information.

Treatment Programs for Employees • The AADAC Business and Industry Clinic offers residential treatment programs specifically for the workplace. Located at the Northern Addictions Centre in Grande Prairie, the clinic offers a complete range of services to meet the needs of employees with substance abuse or gambling problems, as well as the needs of the referring party. Services include detoxification, a 30-day alcohol and drug program, a 50-day cocaine program, a family program and extensive follow-up programs. For more information, call 780-538-6316 or 1-800-419-1149.

Training for the Workplace • AADAC offers training to assist businesses in addressing substance abuse and gambling in the workplace. Training topics include understanding addiction, alcohol and drug policy development, and supervisory training on dealing with the troubled employee. Workshops can be custom designed and delivered at the worksite. For more information, contact your local AADAC area office.

AADAC
ALBERTA ALCOHOL AND DRUG ABUSE COMMISSION

For more information, contact your local AADAC office, call 1-866-33AADAC or visit our website at www.aadac.com

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